



*Le Capitaine'S SINCE 1897*

# LeCapitaines are survivors

■ Cousins have found it's tough to make a buck in the grocery business

By Janet Roberts

Press-Gazette correspondent

**W**hile many independent grocers wonder who'll take over the business when they leave, the next generation is hard at work at LeCapitaine's Super Market, 1464 University Ave.

Cousins Bob and Dave LeCapitaine are co-owners of the store their great-grandfather, John, opened in 1897, on the same site but a few feet closer to the street.

Dave handles the store's meat operation, while Bob covers the grocery operation.

Although LeCapitaine's future is assured for now — both Bob, 47, and Dave, 36, bought out their fathers and say they'll stay in the business — they face many of the same problems that beset other independent store operators in the Green Bay area.

"It's really hard to make a buck in the grocery business," Bob LeCapitaine said.

They've found ways to cut some of their overhead. For example, they can heat the store with the hot air that comes off their refrigeration condensers. They also work long hours in order to keep the payroll manageable and buy from several distributors instead of just one to take advantage of special purchases.

LeCapitaine's has survived over the years by responding to customers' needs, they said. One big need in meat-and-potatoes Green Bay is a full-service meat counter, with chicken and sausage rounding out a full case of beef and pork selections.

"I would say it's at least 50 percent of the business," Dave LeCapitaine said. "We have people who come in from all over town for the meat."

LeCapitaine's is one of two stores in town that supply nearly all the chickens for church booyah feeds, like the ones across the street at SS. Peter and Paul Catholic Church. That's because the store's meat cutters can slice the whole frozen chickens into pieces small enough for cooking without splintering the bones.

The LeCapitaines don't think their prices are that much different from those at mainline supermarkets around town or that the variety of items they sell is that much smaller.

"What we don't have are the five different sizes of something," Dave LeCapitaine said.

What they do have, which the big stores can't duplicate, is a neighborly atmosphere and service such as grocery delivery or custom



## Dave LeCapitaine

■ **Occupation:** Co-owner of LeCapitaine's Super Market, 1464 University Ave.

■ **Address:** 3402 Shadow Lane.

■ **Family:** Wife, Colleen; seven children, Luke, Cory, Jill, Emmy, Kristie, Heather and John.

## Bob LeCapitaine

■ **Occupation:** Co-owner of LeCapitaine's Super Market, 1464 University Ave.

■ **Address:** 2556 Hillside Heights.

■ **Family:** Wife, Sue; two children, Shane and Chris.

meat cutting.

"At the big stores, the checkers don't want to talk to you, except to tell you how much you owe," Bob LeCapitaine said. "It's not that they're unfriendly or that they're not polite, but they have to get you in and out. We know at least half of our customers by name and the others by face."

They also do business with neighborhood folks and people who shop at their stores.

"If I need a plumber, I'm not going to pick up the phone and call somebody I don't know," Bob LeCapitaine said. "I'm going to call the guy who comes into my store."

Most customers do stock-up shopping at the big stores, like Copps or Cub, and come to LeCapitaine's for meat and whatever they either forgot or couldn't find elsewhere.

But competition isn't coming just from the supermarkets anymore. Instead, the boom in convenience stores that sell milk, bread and groceries along with gasoline and oil, and major discount stores such as Sam's Club and Wal-Mart have taken big chunks of the market.

"You've got more and more people selling the same product," Dave LeCapitaine said.

To combat those incursions, the

LeCapitaines concentrate on keeping prices as low as they can, running daily specials and finding other ways to bring in money.

Those other ways can backfire though. They went into the Wisconsin Lottery when it opened several years ago, but are disappointed with the returns on both the scratch-off tickets and the computerized numbers games, such as SuperCash and Powerball.

"We don't earn back the money we spend on it," Bob LeCapitaine said.

They're also concerned about the store's future because they don't see any of their children getting into the business.

Part of that problem is that only male LeCapitaines can buy into the business, according to a dictate set down by the founder.

"He said no girls could go into the business," Bob LeCapitaine said. "I guess he didn't anticipate the day when women would go into business."

But the two owners also say none of their children is interested enough to want to go into the business.

"There's nobody else coming up in the business, although our wives and kids do help out in the store," Dave LeCapitaine said.



# LeCapitaine's to close after 101 years



Press-Gazette photo by Ken Behrend

**To close soon:** David LeCapitaine, owner of LeCapitaine's Super Market, 1464 University Ave., bags groceries for Linda Naniot Friday. LeCapitaine said the store, which has been open for 101 years, will close by this weekend because of too much competition from larger grocery stores.

## Loyal customers 'drifted away'

By Tom Murphy  
Press-Gazette

The 28-foot produce case is half-full. A dozen heads of cabbage and 20 or so packages of carrots await their fate.

Six bottles of 28-ounce Ivory liquid detergent line a shelf front. Behind them is room for 54 more.

The three-tier tissue display shelves are 90 percent empty. Some products are made on North Quincy Street, not two miles distant.

These snippets signal the end for 101-year-old LeCapitaine's Super Market at 1464 University Ave.

"It's too bad," said Al Przybelski

of Hillside Lane as he climbed out of his pickup truck to shop LeCapitaine's. Perhaps for the final time.

"The service I got here was real great compared to other places.

"Like when I make booyah or vegetable soup. I get my chicken here and they'll cut it up. Other places won't do it — or if they do, they charge you for it."

Przybelski, who could — and says he often now does — find a closer grocer, said he's been LeCapitaine's customer "on and off" for 30 years.

"On and off," is the problem, said Dave LeCapitaine, owner and last of the pioneer family to run

the corner landmark on University at Forest Street.

"We got to be sort of a convenience store at the end," LeCapitaine said in his small office just off the butcher shop.

"We had a lot of good, loyal customers, but they drifted away."

Larger stores — and the specials they can offer — most often caused the drift, he said. LeCapitaine won't concede that the monoliths beat him on every price. But 80,000-square-foot stores with more space for more varieties and sizes of the same product didn't help.

Still, economics is pretty much

## ■ STORE From A-1

the reason for shuttering the neighborhood grocery founded by his great-grandfather, John Joseph LeCapitaine, at the same location, in 1897.

Dave, 41, bought out his cousin, Bob, five years ago. By this weekend Dave says he, the fourth generation in the store, will be gone.

"I started here full-time 24 years ago. I was 14, I guess, when I started part-time. The business sure has changed."

For the better?

Cashier Sandy Simons isn't so sure.

"You really get to know the people and their families in 10 years," she said. "We have a lot of elderly customers who are neighbors who walk over. I don't know where they'll go. Jamboree, I guess." (Jamboree, once a Sure Way/Jubilee market, is two long blocks west and a couple of blocks south on Main Street.)

The next closest grocery, Lindy's, is not within hiking distances for most seniors. The phone book says just six blocks separate it from LeCapitaine's. If so, it's the longest stretch of six blocks in the city.

"I guess I just hate to see the place go. They always were good people here, that's for darn sure."

— Janet E. Lemens,  
LeCapitaine shopper

"I guess they'll just have to get their kids to drive them," Simons said.

Janet E. Lemens, 1437 Cedar St., still walks two blocks for a lot of her groceries. But not quite as many as 20 years ago.

"You got to go where you get the better prices," Lemens said. "Still, I come here a couple of times a week. I guess I just hate to see the place go."

"They always were good people here, that's for darn sure."

"You go to those bigger stores and ask a question and sometimes you get an answer. Here they know who you are and help. Dave also gave us good deals, but he's got to charge more or he wouldn't be here as long as he was."

Still, Lemens admitted she shopped larger stores for better prices — real or perceived. So does Al Przybelski. So do a lot of people.

"The shopper numbers just aren't here," LeCapitaine said.

Please see Store/A-2